CHAPTER FOUR

THE BODILY TEXT AND THE TEXTUAL BODY:
THE VIOLENCE OF HISTORY

It forces the silent body to speak…. The violence of the body reaches the written page only through absence, through the intermediary of documents that the historian has been able to see on the sands from which a presence has since been washed away…. The body is a cipher that awaits deciphering.

– Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*

We have reviewed the remapping of history in Deng’s China in terms of the regional-familial, the minority marginal, and the urban-rural spaces. In this last chapter, I shall concentrate on the most basic locales—the personal and, metafictionally, the textual spaces. Since “history—as something given, as a reality, a suprapersonal power—represents no less an oppression of the ego by an external agency …,” private memory can be the last defense line to resist the collective recollection. Insofar as the personal past is concerned, nothing is more immediate than one’s own body, the body being both the agent that experiences and desires to know about history, and the medium through which history violently manifests itself. It is the body that painfully feels the effects of history and on which history forcefully etches itself. Without the body, history is an intangible idea. Not only does history register itself through the life cycle of birth, age, illness and death, but it always also configures itself by disfiguring the human body. Yet the body is not a mere passive object awaiting mutilation; it also plays an active role in an attempt to reconstruct the past, hence the subjectivity, departing from the destructive marks that history

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1 De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 3.

mercilessly imprints. It transforms its flesh and blood into lines and pages, turning its torso into a text. After all, it is the truncated text—the fiction as a fraction of history—that embodies the individual’s memory and imagination of the past.

In his probing study of the body in literature, Peter Brooks extends sexual curiosity about the body to the narrative desire for knowledge under the rubric of the *Wisstrieb*, or “epistemophilia”:

My subject is the nexus of desire, the body, the drive to know, and narrative: those stories we tell about the body in the effort to know and to have it, which result in making the body a site of signification—the place for the inscription of stories—and itself a signifier, a prime agent in narrative plot and meaning.

Here I see the body as a site of historic signification—the place for the inscription of the past—and therefore as a text, a narrative embedded with historical experience and knowledge. At the same time I also read the text as a body, a corpus of signs that invites interpretation and incites pleasure from its reader. Accordingly, I consider the human body as a locus of historical writing—as a text on which the past is violently inscribed—and the textual body as an embodiment of delighted violence. Indeed, the theme of violence appears in all of the preceding chapters. For example, in Mo Yan’s *The Red Sorghum Family*, discussed in chapter 1, the male-dominated history of modern China is presented regionally as a carnival of violent conquests of women by men and violent conflicts among men and women (e.g., the battles between various military forces and the excoriation of Uncle Arhat). In chapter 2, the politics and poetics of representing the minority is dealt by Zhang Chengzhi in the valance of violence. This is followed in chapter 3 by the necessity of violence in Su Tong’s and Wang Shuo’s nostalgia for their comings-of-age in urban space.

Violence involves space—the space of one’s own, particularly one’s own body, being violated. Politically speaking, violence and power are inseparable. In the beginning of his 1919 essay *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber defines the state as “a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e., considered to be legitimate) vio-

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4 Political theorist C. Wright Mills says in his *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 171: “All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence.”